

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

# That's Not Very Finny, Mister

**W**e were sitting around in the WORT studio the other afternoon discussing the bucolic topic of fishing on Jeff Hansen's "A Public Affair." It was going pretty good until, as Steady Eddy likes to say on the Catfish Flats when the line is nailed to the bottom and twangy as a steel guitar: "I do believe you have a hangup there."

We hit a snag. Or perhaps, more accurately, a snag hit us.

Mike Hansen, a DNR Great Lakes sport fisheries specialist, was handling all the heavy work, explaining how salmon from the ocean got to be planted in Lake Michigan and all that technical stuff; I was just there to clean and fillet if the need came up during the hour.

Mike recounted how, in the old days before the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the premium money fish in Lake Michigan was the lake trout, which commercial fishermen fished with nets. They had a good little industry going out there.

I remember those fish-filled days. I was just a little shaver—"a mere smolt," Steady likes to say—and we got to spend some of the summer in Two Rivers with the LeClair family, a fishing clan ever since somebody discovered that working for a living on water was better than working for a living on land, because you could spit and scratch yourself anytime you had to.

"I understand," Steady says. "It's like if you took baseball players and put them out on a barge. Incidentally, did you ever notice how catchers will spit into the wind without holding up a finger first?"

Cousin Diana had married Germain, one of about 900 LeClairs, and they lived in a little frame house right on the shore at Point Beach, and Germain fished with his brothers on the fishtug lone.

As Mike continued his narrative, I could feel the deck teeter-tottering

under me and that first queasy feeling undulating through my stomach like a fish flopping around in there. Germain said to breathe in deeply when the tug was going down. It worked so well that later on I did the same thing on troop ships on the Atlantic. I still do it on airplanes, elevators and stepladders.

Mike explained that once the seaway was completed, sea lampreys came in from the Atlantic through the Welland Canal, which skirts the great natural barrier of Niagara Falls.

The lamprey decimated the lake trout by literally sucking out the fishes' blood and vital fluids.



"It's like you got vampire bats wearing scuba gear," says Steady.

Then the alewives came in from the Atlantic, littering the beaches in such mountainous windrows that when they died, they had to be bulldozed away before people could use the beaches.

The DNR planted salmon to feed on the alewives, Mike said, and the subsequent sport fishery has exploded into an industry worth millions and millions of dollars. Jeff asked why I fished; I said it was "spiritual."

He asked about the danger of eating salmon from Lake Michigan because of PCBs in the flesh and we talked about cleaning them the way DNR suggested: by removing the fatty tissue where PCBs accumulate, cutting out the belly flaps, filleting and slicing off the skin, shaving away all the dark suspect areas next to the skin, and grooving out the lateral lines on the fillets. I said cleaning the fish was a "spiritual experience" too.

A caller bristled over the phone line like a flock of seagulls scavenging a shore. She was not a happy woman. She was angry at WORT for having this kind

of program: "You're supposed to be an *alternative* radio station," she exclaimed. She was especially angry with me for talking about "spirituality" when I was involved in killing. She said the fish in Lake Michigan were poisoned and we were advocating that people poison themselves by eating fish.

I should have shared Steady's wisdom with her.

"We all kill *something*," Steady says. "It can be a bird, a fish, or a rally in the seventh inning."

I also wish I had shared with her Judge John D. Voelker's *Testament of a Fisherman*:

"I fish," the Judge declares, "because I love to; because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly; because of all the television commercials, cocktail parties and assorted social posturing I thus escape; because in a world where most men seem to spend their lives doing things they hate, my fishing is at once an endless source of delight and a small act of rebellion; because trout do not lie or cheat and cannot be bought or bribed or impressed by power, but respond only to quietude and humility and endless patience; because I suspect that men are going along this way for the last time and I, for one, don't want to waste the trip; because mercifully there are no telephones on trout waters; because only in the woods can I find solitude without loneliness; because bourbon out of an old tin cup always tastes better out there; because maybe one day I will catch a mermaid; and, finally, not because I regard fishing as so terribly important but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant—and not nearly so much fun."

"Maybe she'll put the Judge on her fridge," Steady said. "Or maybe she'll put you in it. Stay tuned." ■